



The Liberator: One World War II Soldier's 500-Day Odyssey from the Beaches of Sicily to the Gates of Dachau

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The riveting true story of the bloodiest and most dramatic march to victory of the Second World War, following the battlefield odyssey of a maverick U.S. Army officer and his infantry unit as they fought from the invasion of Italy to the liberation of Dachau at war's end.

From July 10, 1943, the date of the Allied landing in Sicily, to May 8, 1945, when victory in Europe was declared—roughly 500 days—no regiment saw more action, and no single platoon, company, or battalion endured worse, than the one commanded by Felix Sparks, a greenhorn second lieutenant when *The Liberator* begins. Historian Alex Kershaw vividly portrays the immense courage and stamina of Sparks and his men as they fought terrifying engagements against Hitler's finest troops in Sicily and Salerno and as they endured attack after attack on the beaches of Anzio (with Sparks miraculously emerging as his 200-man company's sole survivor). In the bloody battle for southern France, Sparks led his reconstituted unit into action against superbly equipped and trained die-hard SS troops and demonstrated how the difference between defeat and victory would be a matter of character, not tactics or hardware. Finally, he and his men were ordered to liberate Dachau, the Nazis' first concentration camp. It would be their greatest challenge, a soul-searing test of their humanity.

The Liberator: One World War II Soldier's 500-Day Odyssey from the Beaches of Sicily to the Gates of Dachau Details

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From Reader Review The Liberator: One World War II Soldier's 500-Day Odyssey from the Beaches of Sicily to the Gates of Dachau for online ebook

Mike says

This is a well written and well researched account of the WWII action of Felix Sparks and the 45th Thunderbird Division. A gripping story and well worth the read!

happy says

This is an excellent, very well written account of one man's experience in World War II. Mr. Kershaw follows Felix Sparks from enlisting in the Army before WWII through the War and then quickly covers his post war life. Mr. Kershaw does his usual excellent job of telling the tale of the war from the infantryman's point of view. He follows Sparks' war from the invasions of Sicily, Salerno, Anzio and Southern France, the fighting in France and the Vosges Mtns thru the capture of the Bavarian cities of Aufschaffenberg and Nuremberg and finally the liberation of Dachau Concentration Camp

LTC Sparks is everything you want in a commander. He cares for his men, and knows most of them personally, but knows that the mission comes first. At one point, after being wounded and told he would not be able to return to his unit, the then Lt Sparks walks away from the hospital (he does not have permission) and hitches a ride on a B-17 and returns to his Regiment. When the inevitable happens (The hospital wants him back), his Regt Cdr tells him not to worry about it. At the same time he was not above arguing tactics and methods with his superior officers. The author makes the point that maybe he got too close to his men and this caused him great mental anguish when he unavoidably lost them. He twice lost his command to enemy action. This happened when he was a company commander at Anzio, where he was the sole member of his company who was not a casualty. The second time was then as a bn cdr in the Vosges mtns during the last German offensive of the war (Operation Nordwin). He lost his 3 rifle companies when they became surrounded and were unable to be relieved. Some of this incident is told from the German pov, by one of the survivors of the 12th SS Panzer Division.

In addition to Col Sparks, Mr Kershaw tells the story of 157th INF, both good and bad. He does not sugar coat the men. He tells of men breaking under the stress of combat. Atrocities committed by American Troops. Mr. Kershaw tells of the wholesale corruption in Italy, as well a sexual climate of the time. There were more than 50,000 prostitutes in Naples in 1943 and the 157th had a VD rate of more than 15%. The powers that be were very concerned.

Some of his portrayals of senior commanders are not flattering. His take on Mark Clark, the American Commander in Italy is esp damning.

The story of the liberation of Dachau is very well done. The author tells the reaction of the Americans to what they found there. Sparks fight with the Asst Div Cdr of the 42nd ID about a photo op, and the killing of SS prisoners by men under his command.

In summary, this is a must read for anyone interested in World War II in specifically or the military in

general.

Jill Hutchinson says

Why haven't we ever heard of Felix Sparks, a young man whose experiences, bravery, and loyalty to his men in WWII are the epitome of heroism? This is his story which starts with his visit, in 1989, at the age of 72, to the battlefields where he and his men fought against the retreating Germans as American forces started their long journey through Europe to victory.

Sparks was a member of the 157th Regiment of the famous Thunderbird Division which landed on the shores of Sicily in an operation that pitted them against 230,000 Italian troops and another 60,000 Germans further north. Churchill was heard to mutter that he hoped it wouldn't be another Gallipoli, the disastrous action in WWI which ruined Churchill's political career for many years.

We follow Sparks and his Regiment as they fight up the boot of Italy, into France, and finally reaching Germany. The carnage was beyond imagining and many men were mentally broken.....called shell shock during those times....and it was estimated that all men in rifle brigades became psychiatric casualties after 200 days in combat. Sparks had the gift of pulling his men together through his own acts of bravery and his presence in the front lines. (His individual acts of heroism should have earned him the Congressional Medal of Honor but that was not to be). But even Sparks temporarily lost control when they liberated the death camp at Dachau. They were just not prepared for what horrors awaited them there and the SS men still guarding the camp became the targets of a short but violent killing spree by hysterical American soldiers.

There is so much in this book that there is not room in a review to do it justice. The author succinctly describes the actions which can be hard to read. He gives an overall picture of the path of the battles into Germany, concentrating on Sparks and his men. It will make you ask the same question that started this review.....why haven't we ever heard of Felix Sparks? Highly recommended.

Richard says

Like any small boy, I guess I have always enjoyed war comic books and the series and films depicting combat. The Band of Brothers TV series took use all to new levels of almost film documentary and reading Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest left me thinking no future diary or account of men at war would top it.

Well in The Liberator by Alex Kershaw I might need to re-evaluate as he has just taken me on a bloody and brutal journey of another man's war, Felix Sparks.

The isn't a story Sparks chose to write; he appears humble and chastened by his experiences. Yet this humble family man's war time accounts have been teased from him and by thorough research and from surprising sources we have a faller more complete picture the author couldn't have foreseen.

Much fiction helps us to escape the boredom of everyday life indeed many teenagers through modern computer games have fired guns in anger during World War II in a version of Call of Duty. Here then is a personal record of what going to war is like; what commanding men and accepting casualties can do to a

leader. How you can see your life spared due to luck, chance, heroism of others and pure bravery on one's own part. The truth is hard to live with; perhaps it is why many seldom tell their stories. So, when we get a glimpse from the safety of our living rooms it is a real honour and a rare privilege. An old man praying over headstones in a war cemetery and seeing names of men in his company and unit who gave their lives and never losing his sense of responsibility makes me feel remembrance is my duty and gratitude a broken word for my emotions that can never know such loss and sacrifice.

Read Ng says

One last serious omission. P. 310 The last sentence of that section truncates without completing the sentence. ... By two o'clock that afternoon, they.... And the sentence is unfinished. I don't know what they did!

This was a GoodReads giveaway. I am so lucky. It was a pleasure to experience.

We all know that the Allies win against the Axis. But at what price? The horrors of war were never told to me with such pain. I knew that war was hell, but to live it in the eyes of a hero is something else. This book is not for the faint at heart. This story will give you greater insight of events that have forever changed the America's role in the twentieth century. The invasion up through Italy is overshadowed by the Normandy assault. I often wondered about the other front. And just how serious a problem was VD and being "shell shocked"? It concludes well with a short tale of one war heroes post war efforts to make this a less violent. You know the war's conclusion, but you will be turning the pages of this story as quickly as you can because you can't believe what it took to get there. You will be moved by the events.

Ronald Roseborough says

Another great book from a great chronicler of World War II. Some who see a new book about World War II will say it is just a rehashing of oft told tales. But, as long as there are yet men alive who have witnessed that war, there will still be new stories to be told that recount its horrors. Still be lessons to be learned for those who will listen. Felix Sparks survived over 500 days in combat from June 1943 till May 1945. His odyssey took him from the beaches of Sicily to the Bavarian mountains of Germany. He rose from a shave tail lieutenant to a battle scarred lieutenant colonel in the bloodied 45th Division, nicknamed the Thunderbirds. He fought in battles throughout Sicily, Italy, France, and Germany. Unlike many of his men, he managed to survive the meat grinder of the infantry war in Europe while earning many awards including two Purple Hearts. One of his darkest moments of the war occurred near the end of hostilities. His unit was the first into the German concentration camp at Dachau. He would carry the memories of the horrors witnessed there for the rest of his life. Alex Kershaw, the author of other World War II books such as, The Bedford Boys: One American Town's Ultimate D-day Sacrifice and The Longest Winter: The Battle of the Bulge and the Epic Story of WWII's Most Decorated Platoon here tells the complete story of Spark's war. The battles won and lost, the comrades made and too often killed, the lessons learned and the regrets from the tragedy of war. Book provided for review by Amazon Vine.

Kathryn says

This is an extremely well written, solidly researched book that brings a slice of WWII history brilliantly to life. I've read similar titles that are no more than dull summaries of troop movements but because Kershaw makes generous use of personal interviews and letters, his writing is peppered with first-person narrative quotes that make the reader feel as if they were there.

Kate says

This is a story of Felix Sparks and his rise through the ranks as a National Guard soldier who is shipped out with the 157th Regiment, known as the Thunderbirds who would start their war with the landings in Sicily. This Regiment would be in the war 511 days, loose 3,650 men, suffer 13,729 men wounded in battle, and 41,647 non combat casualties yet be one of the least written about least awarded Regiments in the war. Like all stories of war and the men who fight them and the men charged with leading them what is viewed as important often comes down to which general is the most publicity seeking, who hero de jour, and has the swagger civilians think are attributes to real warriors. The press which prefers access and lives on briefings and is easily distracted away from the real stories to the ones which promise the most success.

The landings on Sicily with the strategy of marching up the boot of Italy to attack the underbelly of the Reich was at best an ill conceived adventure, promoted by the British and Churchill as the easiest route to the invasion into Germany. I had an uncle who was an infantryman in this venture, I don't know if he was one of the fresh replacement recruits who was thrown into this venture late in the Italian campaign after it stalled or anything about his story because he never spoke of it not even to my father who was a Veteran from the Pacific.

I do know that Felix Sparks if Alex Kershaw has portrayed him correctly was the type of officer that my father would have respected, much like he respected Matt Ridgeway because there were so many Generals and officers he held little respect for.

Sparks got his first battle command of E Company before the invasion of Italy after Sicily was put to bed. He was a soldier who took time to know his men, and stayed with them and never failed to take his objective even if the Companies around him couldn't and left both he and his men without any flanking protection. The 2nd battalion lost 75% of their men Sparks was one of the only one who made it back to the caves out of his Company. The battles of Salerno and Anzio are not as well known as the landings at Normandy, and the meat grinder they were had few comparable battles the exceptions being those winter battles; the Battle of the Bulge and the battle in the Vosges mountains which Sparks fought in.

This was totally engaging, and gave me a greater appreciation for the men who followed Sparks path often under less than acceptable Generals whose bad decisions from weakness or ego caused unnecessary and excessive combat losses. It is amazing that Sparks survived from the first landing in Sicily through the landings in Italy and southern France to the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp to the end of the war. As my father firmly believed fate often is fickle and each day gives you two options you will live or die and it is a choice that no one has much input to so there is not much point in sweating it.

Kershaw writes in a manner that lets a reader feel each battle clearly, it is like the topography and the intensity is as vivid as a good film. I am left with many books from his bibliography to add to my "to read" list.

Michael Burnam-Fink says

Kershaw ably depicts the terror and struggle of the Second World War through the eyes of Felix Sparks, an officer with the 45th Division (The Thunderbirds) composed of men from the southwest. A poor boy from a depression mining town in Arizona, Sparks enlisted in the 30s, thrived in the army, and then was recalled as an officer for the war.

To paraphrase Sparks, getting promoted in the infantry is easy, all you need to do is survive. Now, surviving is the hard part. The 45th landed at Sicily, Salerno, the meatgrinder of Anzio where Sparks' company was ruthlessly destroyed in the Battle of the Caverns. They were reconstituted, and sent through the forgotten campaigns of the war—the invasion of the South of France, and another brutal mini-Battle of the Bulge in the Vosges Mountain, where his regiment was surrounded and destroyed by the SS. Rebuilt again, Sparks fought through Germany to liberate the Dachau concentration camp, where he personally intervened to prevent a massacre of SS prisoners. Sparks' principles got him in trouble with his commanders. He survived, had a distinguished career as a lawyer in Colorado, and spent his final years fighting gun violence.

I have some quibbles, like why would any World War 2 writer try to excuse even normal military operations of the Waffen-SS by the phrase 'they were just following orders', but this is an a great biography that reveals some corners of the war you won't see on the History Channel.

Mark Hartzer says

Even though I loved this book, it was not an easy read for me for a number of reasons. 1st, Kershaw does a remarkable job presenting the 'unvarnished' version of war and what transpires. He tracks the 45th Infantry Division and focuses primarily on Felix Sparks who would become a colonel. The brutality and horror of war is eloquently described. For example, on page 114, during the Anzio campaign, he writes: "On busy streets like the Via Roma pimps and black marketers were almost as numerous as the beggars and emaciated whores. Naples was a vast open air bordello, it seemed, where everyone and everything was for sale. "You want nice girl?" asked fathers. "Beautiful signorina. "" What kind of father could even conceive of something except during the desperation of war.

The 2nd thing that struck me was how the ravings of Hitler unleashed such terrible devastation upon Europe and supposedly civilized societies. It was utter madness, and a whole country followed him down that primrose path to horror. The men of the 45th were, by and large, good men trying the end as quickly as possible that horror. I don't generally read war books because they are either superficial; glorify something that is by its nature, terrible; or are sadly, accurate. Meaning that war is truly, hell. This book is definitely the latter. Kershaw does a great job painting an accurate picture.

Finally, I had no real idea about the 45th Infantry Division. It clearly saw more action than virtually any other unit in the entire war. 511 days of continuous action: From Sicily to Anzio, to another beach landing in France, to Dachau and finally Bavaria. My Dad never much likes to talk about the War. He's old now; almost 87. He was severely wounded in that terrible winter of 1944 in the Ardennes forest. Now I know why he won't really go into details... they were really horrible. Like so many other Thunderbirds, he was decorated. 2 Bronze Stars with Oak Leaf clusters. Thanks Dad, and the rest of your unit, the 45th Infantry Division.

John says

For me the power of this story began at the gates of Dachau

Aside from the extraordinary story of Felix Sparks I learned about what happened the day Dachau concentration camp was liberated. The emotional anguish and trauma the American troops were not ready nor trained to anticipate or experience. Who could have ever believed that this level of genocide could exist? Some events occurred on that day which were less than, shall we say, heroic. Sparks rose to the occasion and his integrity kept a lid on a very difficult situation. Through out his life he rose to many occasions. The death of his grandson being another. Felix was truly a magnificent person.

Additionally I was overwhelmed with the sheer magnitude of the German Army suffering 90% of their combat deaths on the Eastern Front. That's huge. And the Russian Army suffered 65% of all Allied fatalities. Just imagine how events would have unfolded without the Eastern campaign of the Nazis. It seems to me that we Americans gloss over the contributions and sacrifices the Russian people made out of necessity during WWII. They deserve our debt of gratitude. Without them The Third Reich might well have established Fortress Europa and brought England to her knees.

Our losses were still 200,000 fewer than during the Civil War.

What I haven't been able to put into perspective is the extent of the Jewish Holocaust compared to the genocide the Slavs faced. All is terrible. The numbers are unfathomable. The magnitude was immense. At the time of liberation there were more Poles in the camp than Jews.

A.L. Sowards says

This book is a well-written story of an incredible man. Felix Sparks joined the US Army one day when, out of money and unable to find work, he ran into a recruiter. He saved his money, started college, and then found himself called back into the army as fear of war escalated. After Pearl Harbor, he knew he'd be in for the long haul.

Sparks served with the 157th regiment, the Thunderbirds, a National Guard unit from Oklahoma, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. By the time they arrived in Europe, he was a captain in charge of a company. By the time they'd fought in Sicily, Salerno, Anzio, across southern France and into Germany, he was a lieutenant colonel.

The book focuses on Sparks, but also pulls in information about what higher-up officers, national leaders, and the opposing infantryman were doing. I thought the extra information added to the book, and Kershaw is a skilled enough writer that I never found the transitions jumpy. I also enjoyed the focus on Sparks, which kept the book easy to follow through multiple military campaigns.

There is a quote at the beginning of one of the chapters by a French diplomat, saying "We live in a free world today because in 1945 the forces of imperfect goodness defeated the forces of near-perfect evil". Kershaw shows how that quote is true—Sparks and his men weren't perfect. There was looting, ridiculous

officers seeking glory (General Clark comes to mind), and STDs were widespread. But the Thunderbirds did their job. The “nearly perfect evil” part of the quote can be summed up in one word: Dachau.

You know that saying, “war is hell?” You see that in this book. Men broke under the constant strain of battle, and twice Sparks lost entire companies of men. (I guess that’s a spoiler, but it’s mentioned in the prologue.) But you also see Sparks’s humanity in this book. He cared about the men he led. And he cared about doing what’s right. That was best shown in the liberation of Dachau. Sparks and his men were shocked by what they found at the concentration camp. Most of the men cried. Some of them lost it, and began shooting the SS guards. It would have been easy for Sparks to ignore what was happening, but as soon as he realized what was going on, he stopped it. A photograph of him holding his hand out and shooting his pistol in the air to stop the slaughter is what inspired this book.

Kershaw doesn’t set out to cover the entire war, but he does a great job pulling in enough information to give readers a good picture of what was going on elsewhere. The Thunderbird campaigns in Sicily, Italy, southern France (instead of Normandy) and the Vosges (instead of the Ardennes) were a change from the more-often covered campaigns to the north.

I highly recommend *The Liberator* for others who enjoy WWII nonfiction. It’s a book that brought me to tears more than once, and it will stay with me for a while.

FYI, there is some swearing—mostly in quotes from the men who fought. That and details about war and life on the front make this book something I would recommend only for older readers.

'Aussie Rick' says

OK, where to start with this review the author, Alex Kershaw has done us all a service by telling us the story of a great and humble man, a soldier who served his country during WW2 and took more interest in his men than in himself. The man in question, unknown to most of us until now, was Felix Sparks. I dare say, an average American, who becomes an extraordinary combat leader.

Alex Kershaw decided to take us on this journey with Felix Sparks and the men of the 157th Infantry Regiment of the 45th “Thunderbird” Division after finding a unique and until now, not seen photograph of an American officer stopping US troops from shooting unarmed Waffen SS prisoners at Dachau Concentration Camp. What a photo, it’s true – a picture is worth a thousand words!

But the journey begins with a young Felix Sparks prior to WW2 and then follows him and the men of the 45th Division from training through the Sicily invasion, onto Italy & Anzio, then Southern France, the hard fighting through Alsace-Lorraine and the forests of the Vosges and into Bavaria till the end of the war. We then read about the life of this amazing man after the war and all the things he managed to accomplish along with tragedy within his family.

This book is a enjoyable read, fast paced, full of interesting and great stories about American soldiers faced with the horrendous costs of fighting against tough adversaries and how humanity can still survive after and during the horrors of war. I recommend this book to anyone who enjoys a great read of men in combat or to anyone who just enjoys a good story – this has to be Alex’s best book so far!

Paul Greenpage says

Great robin. Real page-turner saw me finish this within a week. Not a dedicated biography throughout, and in being so, has opened up doors to other adjacent robins of characters intertwined with Sparks' story, that I have since shelved as to-robin. Four stars.

David Hill says

Thinking about what I wanted to say here, for a while I considered a minor niggle: it's not so much one soldier's odyssey as it is a unit history. I would be correct to pick that nit, but also not correct. This is not a personal history; it's not Felix Sparks telling his story. And it is the story of the 157th Infantry Regiment. But, having got to the end, I'm not sure how one could tell the story of the 157th Infantry Regiment without concentrating on Sparks for he was clearly at the center of it all.

Kershaw is in his element here. I don't want to minimize his effort; a lesser writer could have made a dog's breakfast out of it. But his job was certainly made easier because Spark's story is so compelling. The full range of human emotion is here. The entire book is excellent, but there are a few sections I feel merit mention. The several chapters covering action at Anzio, the shorter section about Reipertswiller, and, finally, the chapters about Dachau.

The book includes the (expected) end notes, index, and bibliography, as well as a number of b&w photographs and several maps that aid the text.

I make it a habit to go through the notes and bibliography, as I'm always in search of other good books to read. Some of my friends give me grief because I read so much about World War II. What struck me with this book is the high percentage of the bibliography that I've already read. Have I read a snippet here or there about Sparks? If I did, it wasn't particularly memorable. Now, though, if I come across the name, I will easily recall the whole story.
